

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 15
SECTION 1

CHICAGO TRIBUNE
16 August 1985

Perspective

Is Marcos too clever for us?

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The American program for promoting democratic change in President Ferdinand Marcos' crumbling regime in the Philippines threatens to be too little too late. It is not clever enough to deal with Marcos' skill at evading American conditions. Like the race between Achilles and the tortoise in Zeno's paradox, the Marcos tortoise will always be one step ahead of the American Achilles.

American policymakers have set milestones to judge the success or failure of U.S. efforts to promote democratic reform of the military, the economy and the political situation. If at these points policy is deemed a failure, the United States will cut off military aid in a desperate measure, perhaps the last, to force Marcos to change.

The last time the U.S. threatened such action was in 1950, forcing appointment of Ramon Magsaysay as defense secretary. With American sponsorship, Magsaysay fought a successful counter-insurgency campaign against the communist-influenced Huks and later was elected president.

There is little certainty today that similar U.S. pressure would be as successful or as welcome by Filipinos today. But if American pressure isn't used, there is no assurance that democracy will return to the Philippines.

Yet the milestones the U.S. has set, while fast approaching, are also receding into the future. This anomaly is due to Marcos' adeptness at maneuvering out of tight situations and the American failure to decide when to act and how.

For example, one of the milestones is the status of Gen. Fabian Ver as chief of staff of the armed forces. Ver is on trial for his involvement in Sen. Benigno Aquino's assassination, and the U.S. doesn't want him reappointed even if acquitted. Numerous American officials have traveled to Manila to acquaint President Marcos with this desire.

In response, the climax of the trial keeps getting postponed; results may not be known until fall. Rumors circulate of Ver's willingness to accept American-requested military reforms in the hope

the U.S. will reconsider its view of him. If this doesn't work, Marcos will likely appoint as Ver's replacement a general who isn't the American preference. [The U.S. choice would be the acting chief of staff, Gen. Fidel Ramos.] Thus, the moment for an American decision will shift.

The same approach of obfuscating issues and delaying decisions is being applied to two other American milestones. One is deregulation of the agricultural monopolies that continue to be controlled by Marcos' cronies, Eduardo Cojuangco and Roberto Benedicto. The other is election reform, including appointment of new members to the Commission of Elections, five of whose nine seats remain vacant, and passage of a new election code, legitimizing a citizen's election watchdog agency.

Although there is a consensus within the administration and Congress as to the importance of these reforms and agreement that an American military aid cutoff may be needed to bring them about, Marcos' actions delay any decision to end the aid.

The dramatic and unusual nature of such a decision will make its initiation unlikely unless prior consent is achieved by all interested bureaucratic actors, including State, Treasury, Pentagon, the CIA, the White House and congressional leaders. In the meantime, the new communist insurgency will grow and the Philippine economy will continue to deteriorate.

Without prior agreement, every decision point will find numerous voices being raised as to why the action or the timing is inappropriate.

The problem U.S. policymakers have with the Philippines has its analog in other issues. The U.S. can see the future but cannot bring itself to act in the present. Thus, time after time, we find ourselves backing Third World dictators past their prime.

Firm milestones are possible. Actions can be decided in advance, but only if political leadership is willing to take risks. In the case of the Philippines, the milestones have names and the U.S. should make those names explicit: Fidel Ramos should be confirmed at chief of staff; crony capitalists such as Cojuangco and Benedicto must divest their holdings; the National Movement for Free Elections should be named as the election watchdog group.

Only if such lines are drawn will the U.S. and the Philippines know when the time for running has ended.

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